

The Somme: An exercise in futility?

First World War Military

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The first day of the Somme has become synonymous with incompetent leadership and a callous disregard for human life. Gary Sheffield offers a more complex picture of the battle and the role played by General Sir Douglas Haig.

The Battle of the Somme, or at least its opening day, is such a notorious event that it is difficult to assess it objectively. On the first day of the offensive, July 1st, 1916, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) suffered 57,000 casualties, of whom 19,000 were killed. This was just the beginning of a four-month attritional struggle, which may have resulted in as many as 1.2 million British, French and German casualties. The Allies advanced a maximum of seven miles. Arras and Passchendaele followed in 1917, battles that similarly failed to break through the German trenches but which caused enormous losses. Such was the scale of the suffering that many see the Somme as mere futile slaughter and the Commander-in-Chief of the BEF, General (later Field Marshal) Sir Douglas Haig as a criminally incompetent 'butcher'. At least in the anglophone world, it is difficult to separate the reputation of the Somme from that of Haig, both of which have undergone revision in recent years.

From the 1980s onwards scholars began a full-scale reassessment of the BEF. A rough consensus emerged that, faced with the seemingly intractable problems of trench warfare and revolutionary changes in the conduct of war, the BEF eventually adapted well to these new conditions and by 1918 it had emerged as an effective fighting force. There is no such consensus about Haig. Historians such as Tim Travers, Ian Beckett, Paul Harris and the team of Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson take a generally dim view of his generalship. Other historians, such as Stephen Badsey, John Bourne and Peter Simkins, although far from uncritical, regard Haig in a more positive light. Even in the 1960s, when risible books such as Alan Clark's *The Donkeys* (actually about the British army in 1915) attracted much attention, some historians such as John Terraine, Cyril Falls and Anthony Farrar-Hockley had been prepared to see the Somme as something other than blind slaughter.

The Somme continues to divide historians. Prior and Wilson's 2006 book *The Somme* takes a downbeat view of the battle. By contrast, my study, *The Somme* (2003), places the offensive in the context of the BEF's learning process and argues that the battle was an attritional success for the Entente powers, an essential step on the road to eventual victory. William Philpott's 2009 book goes even further. To quote its title, the Somme was a 'Bloody Victory', Philpott being perhaps the first historian since Terraine to make that claim, and he, too, explicitly links the 1916 battle with Allied success in 1918 (he also firmly re-inserts the French army into the narrative of the Somme). Today, the debate goes on: the 2016 edition of Prior and Wilson's *Somme* is critical of Haig and robustly disputes Philpott's thesis.

The Battle of the Somme was the consequence of Allied strategy agreed in late 1915, whereby sequential offensives would be mounted on the Eastern, Western and Italian fronts. The Franco-British contribution was to be a 'push' in the area of the River Somme. Originally, the French army was to play the major role but the German offensive at Verdun, which began on February 21st, 1916, changed all that. Increasing numbers of French divisions were committed to Verdun, meaning that, when the attack was finally launched, on July 1st, it was Haig's BEF that took the lead. This was a major test for the British. Much of the BEF consisted of raw wartime volunteers, the majority fighting in their first major battle. This deprived the BEF of the advantage of being nursed through the Somme by the experienced French army. On the northern part of the battlefield on July 1st there was some initial success, which could not be sustained, but otherwise it was a picture of bloody failure.

South of the Roman road that ran diagonally across the battlefield things were different. Indeed, on the extreme right of the line the British took all of their objectives and the French did exceptionally well, the latter's advances being achieved while sustaining very light casualties. July 1st, 1916 was the beginning, not the end of the Battle of the Somme. For four months, until November 18th, the Allies continued the offensive, gradually forcing the Germans back but failing to deliver a knockout blow. Such a result was almost certainly impossible to achieve on the Western Front in 1916. It was certainly beyond the capabilities of the inexperienced BEF.

Douglas Haig, newly promoted to Field Marshal, by William Orpen, 1917

The Somme is central to assessments of Haig's generalship. He has been accused of being ludicrously over-optimistic and of failing to exercise proper control over his senior subordinates. Other writers, while acknowledging Haig's mistakes, view the Somme as a key stage in his learning experience. It is important to remember that he had only become C-in-C in December 1915 and it was the first major battle which he had commanded at this level. As C-in-C, Haig's responsibilities were huge. He was far more than just a battlefield commander. Rather, he was a 'war manager', answerable to the government for the operations, discipline, training, logistics and welfare of the largest British army in history. In today's terms he was an Army Group Commander, responsible for conducting operations; a theatre commander with a huge political and administrative burden; and a National Contingent Commander, the senior British soldier in the coalition forces on the Western Front. Arguably, as C-in-C he simply had too much to do, but Haig was reluctant to give up any of his responsibilities.

One of Haig's urgent tasks on becoming C-in-C was to establish his authority. As a full general, he was the same rank as his army commanders. Although Haig's authority was surprisingly limited (he did not have a free hand in hiring and firing), he made it clear that he would only allow promotion on merit and was prepared to work with men with whom he had a difficult relationship. General Sir Henry Rawlinson, commander of Fourth Army, had been caught trying to scapegoat a subordinate for a failure in battle in 1915, but after due consideration Haig had decided not to sack him. In December 1915 Haig recommended Rawlinson for promotion knowing that he was 'not a sincere man' but believing 'he has brains and experience'. It has been argued that Haig's forbidding character discouraged subordinates from discussion because they were scared of him. It is an assertion undermined by the planning for the Somme, during which there was a great deal of debate between Haig and Rawlinson. In the end, the Fourth Army commander simply ignored his C-in-C.

Three other charges are often made against Haig. First, he was too optimistic. There is some truth in this. Certainly his tendency to believe what he wanted to believe about the German morale and manpower reserves was, in 1916, his most serious defect as a commander. Brigadier-General Charteris, his intelligence chief, shared Haig's optimism, but was not the cause of it. The second charge is that he was a technophobe. On the contrary, Haig was a keen advocate of tanks, aircraft, artillery and machine-guns. In fact, one of Haig's most important achievements was to oversee the transformation of the BEF from a mere collection of units into a war-winning army. He played a critical role in the adoption of modern technology into the BEF, as well as developing training, logistics, doctrine and numerous other matters. Even during the victorious campaigns of 1918, the BEF was a flawed instrument of war. On the Somme two years earlier, the learning curve was steep indeed: but it was real. The much-improved performance of the BEF at the beginning to the Battle of Arras in April 1917 is testimony to that, although there was still much to learn. Strangely, many historians have downplayed the significance of his wider role as a war manager.

A third criticism is that Haig was callous. Although he was a ruthless practitioner of total war, he was not heartless with it. He had a full measure of paternalism common to British regular army officers. 'Why waste your time painting me?', he burst out to William Orpen, when he was sitting for his portrait. 'Go and paint the men. They're the fellows that are saving the world, and they're getting killed every day.' Haig's remoteness from the ordinary soldier should not be equated with callousness. His means of imposing his personality on the army, by inspecting them on parade and publishing orders, was appropriate for an army drawn from a deferential society although, as his aide-de-camp noted, Haig 'talks to any odd man in the road: all being a means to the end, to keep in touch with the spirit of his troops'. Haig faced the same dilemma as every military commander in history: to achieve objectives, he had to put his own troops in harm's way. He commanded more British soldiers than any other general, before or since. Given that simple fact and the general bloodiness of the fighting on the Western Front, it was inevitable that more British soldiers would be killed on Haig's watch than at any other time in Britain's military history.

In preparing for the Somme, Haig had a 'Plan A': an ambitious operation to break through the German positions and reopen mobile warfare; and a 'Plan B': a more limited attritional offensive, possibly combined with an attack at Ypres. He has been much criticised for an antediluvian approach to modern war because he kept faith in cavalry. As innovative recent research has demonstrated, however, even on the Western Front cavalry could be highly effective, as was demonstrated on July 14th, 1916 near High Wood. The cavalry most definitely had a role in open warfare. If a tactical defeat of enemy infantry is to be converted into something greater, it is essential to have an instrument of exploitation, i.e. troops that can move faster than foot-soldiers, to get in among the retreating enemy and rout them. Given that the tank was only introduced in September 1916 and, in any case, was far too slow and unreliable to be used in this role, cavalry was Haig's only option. The experience of the Germans in March 1918, when they pushed the BEF back but were unable to build on their initial success, demonstrated the perils of mounting an offensive without cavalry.

The first official photograph of a British tank in action, Flers-Courcelette, September 15th, 1916

Haig intended all-arms groups of Hubert Gough's Reserve Army to play a key role. 'When a break in [the enemy's] line is made', Haig instructed, 'cavalry and mobile troops must be at hand to advance at once to make a bridgehead (until relieved by infantry) beyond the gap ... At the

same time our mounted troops must cooperate with our main attacking force in widening the gap.' This was a bold, imaginative response to the problems identified in 1915, firmly grounded in the practice of earlier years and anticipating many of the post-1918 developments in mobile warfare. But it was also extremely ambitious and the staff work and traffic control involved would have severely taxed the inexperienced BEF. In the event, 'Gough's Mobile Army' was the victim of a fundamental disagreement between Haig and Rawlinson about how the Battle of the Somme should be fought.

Rawlinson's plan aimed for limited advances to capture the high ground followed by a pause to break up the inevitable German counterattacks. The eventual plan that emerged was an unhappy compromise between two fundamentally different concepts of operations. Rawlinson paid lip service to the C-in-C's concept while quietly working to subvert it. The consequence was tragic. The situation in the early afternoon of July 1st, with the German First Position in British hands, cried out for Gough's Reserve Army to fight its way onto the weakly defended Second Position. The Germans had few forces to stop a determined advance. Positions, which subsequently took months to capture at the cost of thousands of lives, could have been taken quickly. In sum, the first day on the Somme could have ended with a partial success for the BEF.

But Rawlinson ignored Haig's clearly expressed concept of operations. He failed to order local reserves forward, paid no attention to Gough and at midday issued an order for the Reserve Army to stand down. At 12.15pm Rawlinson wrote in his diary: 'There is of course no hope of getting cavalry through today.' According to one source the XIII Corps commander, after carrying out a personal reconnaissance, telephoned Rawlinson for permission to advance, only to be turned down. The most likely reason why Rawlinson refused to advance is that he had made up his mind long before the battle. In a classic example of cognitive dissonance he simply refused to believe the optimistic reports arriving on his desk. This is not to argue that, if Rawlinson had committed the mobile reserves, Haig's ambitious breakthrough plan would have succeeded in full. Apart from anything else, the BEF's logistic system was at that time incapable of sustaining a major advance. But even an advance of 20 or so miles ending in a resumption of static warfare would have been a major political victory that would have enhanced Britain's standing in the coalition and might, just might, have undermined German confidence sufficiently to have brought about an offer of a compromise peace on terms acceptable to the Allies. While Haig has often been accused of blindly adhering to a doctrine of breakthrough, on July 1st, 1916 it was Rawlinson's rigid refusal to countenance anything but a limited 'bite and hold' approach that was disastrous.

Haig was little more than a bystander as his plans were being wrecked by Rawlinson. July 1st, 1916 reveals much about the impotence of high commanders in the First World War once battle had been joined. Haig spent the morning at his Advanced HQ. At noon he wrote a letter in which he gave a report on the progress of the battle. Although it may seem incongruous, or even obscene, for the general in command of a great army to be catching up with his routine paperwork in the middle of a terrible battle, in truth it was as sensible a use of Haig's time as any. Because Haig noted the exact time on his letter we have a clear idea of how much he knew about the true situation four and a half hours after the infantry went over the top: not very much. In the absence of reliable radio communications, a major contributing factor to the deadlock, it could not be otherwise. Haig arrived at Fourth Army HQ in the early afternoon. He did not intervene to rescind the order for the Reserve Army to stand down, if indeed he knew of it. In accordance with army doctrine he requested, but did not order, the Fourth Army to continue to attack on July 2nd.

Although Rawlinson remained in command of the Fourth Army throughout the Somme campaign, Haig grew increasingly dissatisfied with his performance. Rawlinson was sidelined during 1917 and returned to front-line command in 1918 largely through the influence of his friend Henry Wilson, by that stage Chief of the Imperial General Staff. In the Hundred Days –the series of decisive Allied offensives, beginning with the Battle of Amiens, that ran from August 8th to November 11th, 1918 – under very different conditions from the Somme, Rawlinson proved an outstanding success as the Fourth Army’s commander.

Here is not the place for a detailed analysis of the reasons for the failure and success on July 1st, 1916 but we can identify elements for which Haig was personally responsible. On June 30th, Haig wrote to his wife: ‘I feel that everything possible for us to do to achieve success has been done.’ These words reflected the huge efforts put into preparing the army for battle and, as C-in-C, Haig deserved a share of the credit for any success, as well as ultimate responsibility for any failures. Haig cannot really be blamed for the failure of tactics employed by the infantry. He certainly made clear his views on tactics to his senior officers but the actual methods used by brigades and battalions were decided, quite properly, by local commanders. The idea that the infantry uniformly advanced slowly in lines has been shown to be false. It is clear that Haig erroneously believed that German barbed-wire had been cut by the artillery bombardment before the attack on July 1st, but this was the information he had received as the result of a collective intelligence failure.

Haig’s operational plan was sound in principle but too ambitious in practice, given the state of training and the inexperience of the BEF in 1916. It was a case of trying to make his army run before it could walk. He also deserves criticism for failing to impose his will on Rawlinson, although the Fourth Army commander deserves more opprobrium for sabotaging Haig’s concept of operations. Haig’s worst mistake was his misuse of artillery. ‘Poor Haig’, Major General J.F.N. ‘Curly’ Birch, artillery advisor at GHQ later reflected, ‘ – as he was always inclined to – spread his guns.’ In theory, Haig understood the need to concentrate artillery fire but, nonetheless, the frontage of trench attacked was too wide for the number of guns available. Haig made things worse by directing that a greater depth of trench, an average of 2,500 yards, should be included in the bombardment plan. Birch told Haig that ‘he was “stretching” his artillery too much’, but Haig simply overruled him. The result was that the weight of shell was dispersed, not concentrated. Too few guns were given too much to do. It was a ghastly error on Haig’s part, perhaps prompted by a misreading of the lessons of recent battles.

As with many battles of the First World War, the ‘butcher’s bill’ is debated by historians, but there were probably 420,000 British Empire killed, wounded and missing, 200,000 French and 500-600,000 Germans (a much lower German figure has been postulated but this is based on a controversial source). Although morale remained substantially intact on both sides, attrition favoured the Allies, not least because of the degrading of the quality of the German army. The conflict on the Western Front climaxed, in 1918, with a series of decisive Allied offensives, but the cumulative attrition of the previous years played a vital role in determining the outcome. It is wrong to see the Somme as an aberration. High-intensity battles fought between equally matched armies fielded by modern industrialised states in the era of total war were invariably attritional pounding matches, even when, as in 1918 and in the Second World War, they became mobile.

The inexperienced, poorly-trained BEF achieved as much on the Somme as it was reasonable to expect under the circumstances. It made the enemy take notice. Before the Somme, German high command had underestimated the British army. Now, it faced the unpalatable reality of a major new force on the Western Front. This contributed to a new strategy. The German army at

the end of 1916 was utterly worn out. Between February and March 1917 it abandoned the Somme battlefield and pulled back to 20 miles to the newly built Hindenburg Line. This gave tactical advantages but was also a tacit admittance of defeat. Germany sought to achieve victory at sea, using submarines to try to cut the 'Atlantic lifeline' by sinking the merchant shipping that kept Britain supplied with essential supplies. This was a dangerous gamble, for the move to 'unrestricted' submarine warfare involved attacking neutral shipping, a move that predictably brought the US into the war, further stacking the odds against Germany.

Could Haig claim credit for these consequences of the Somme? The answer is a qualified 'yes'. In his first experience of commanding the BEF in a major battle, Haig's performance was undeniably erratic. His expectations of his green troops were too high, especially in the initial stages. He failed to 'grip' his principal subordinate, Rawlinson. The Somme was a painful but vital stage in Haig's training as a high commander. In a rare moment of self-analysis, he admitted as much at the end of the battle in a conversation with one of his divisional generals. But hammering away on the Somme was the right strategy. It did not produce a crisis of the magnitude for which Haig hoped, but nonetheless it weakened the German army. The Allied offensive also had an impact on the minds of the German politico-military leadership that helped to deflect them onto paths that proved ultimately disastrous for their cause.

Haig's official despatch written in December 1916 was uncompromisingly entitled 'The Opening of the Wearing-Out Battle'. He also followed this line in his 'Final Despatch' of 1919, a carefully constructed and powerful interpretation of the BEF's operations, which argued that the fighting on the Western Front from 1914 to 1918 formed 'a single continuous campaign' of 'ceaseless attrition', the pay-off being the vict-ories of the Hundred Days. Although Haig imposed a degree of coherence on events that in reality was absent and downplayed his expectation of decisive success in 1916, this interpretation has never been satisfactorily debunked. Indeed, it is reflected in influential writings on the Somme to this day. The Somme was a tragic, wasteful battle, but it was not an exercise in futility.

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